

## EPR STUDIES ON THE BLUE COPPER PROTEIN, RUSTICYANIN

### A protein involved in $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ oxidation at pH 2.0 in *Thiobacillus ferro-oxidans*

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#### 1. Introduction

Copper proteins may contain up to three different forms of copper, designated types 1, 2 and 3 [1]. Of the many copper proteins found in nature, one group which has been the focus of much recent attention is the blue copper proteins. Several blue copper proteins have been discovered, all characterised by an intense absorption around 600 nm and an unusual EPR spectrum, having a very small hyperfine splitting constant [2]. Blue copper proteins may contain one or more copper atoms per molecule (and one or more types of copper) but the intense blue colour and unusual EPR parameters are associated solely with the type 1 copper [3].

There are numerous blue proteins which contain only type 1 copper, e.g., azurin, stellacyanin, urmetocyanin and plastocyanin [2]. Although these proteins are basically similar with respect to their absorption

and EPR properties, they differ significantly in terms of their function and minute properties such as  $g$ - and  $A$ -values from the EPR spectrum, absorption maxima, mid-point potential, response to pH variation [1]. Those blue proteins which exhibit some unusual characteristics are of special interest and it is useful to study them to see if an overall pattern emerges relating the variation in properties to the nature of the copper centre.

In this paper we examine the EPR properties of such a protein, namely rusticyanin, a blue copper protein recently purified from the acidophilic bacterium *Thiobacillus ferro-oxidans* [4], which contains one copper atom per molecule. Rusticyanin is thought to be the initial acceptor of electrons in the oxidation of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  by *Thiobacillus ferro-oxidans* [5]. It is stable at pH 2.0 and at this pH addition of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  causes a reversible loss of blue colour which may be a reduction of the Cu centre by  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ . The mid-point potential at pH 2 of rusticyanin is 0.68 V [6] which is unusually high, being second only to the blue oxidase laccase from the fungus *Polyporus versicolor*. We report the effects of pH variation and certain anions on the EPR spectrum of rusticyanin and examine quantitatively the proposal that  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  acts as a reductant for the copper centre.

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## 2. Materials and methods

Rusticyanin was prepared as in [4]. EPR measurements were made at 77 K in a Varian E-3 spectrometer at 9.12 GHz and at about 90 K in a Varian V-4503 spectrometer operating at 34.8 GHz. Optical spectra were measured with a Beckman model 24 spectrophotometer at 20°C. EPR-detectable copper was measured by double integration of the 9 GHz EPR spectrum, comparing with a standard solution of  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  in 2 M  $\text{NaClO}_4$ , pH 2. Total copper was determined in a Perkin Elmer model 303 atomic absorption spectrophotometer. Dialysis was carried out against 10 mM  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , pH 2.0, using Visking dialysis tubing. Simulations of EPR spectra were performed with a Nova 3 minicomputer.

## 3. Results

Figures 1 and 2 show the EPR spectra of oxidized rusticyanin recorded at 9 GHz and 35 GHz, respectively. The figures also show computer simulated spectra using the  $g$ -values (2.019, 2.064, 2.229) and  $A$ -values (6.5, 2.0, 4.5) mT, which give a satisfactory

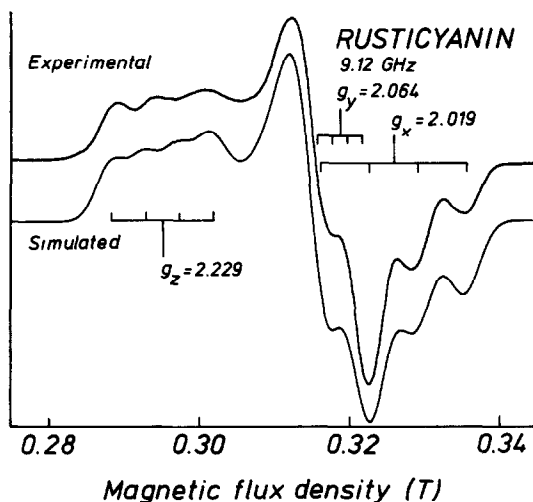


Fig.1. EPR spectrum of rusticyanin (pH 2, 0.9 mM  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$ ) recorded at microwave frequency, 9.121 GHz, temp. 77 K and microwave power, 20 mW. Lower trace is a simulated spectrum using Gaussian line-shape with  $g$ -values (2.019, 2.064, 2.229),  $A$ -values (6.5, 2.0, 4.5) mT and line-widths (4.0, 5.0, 3.8) mT.

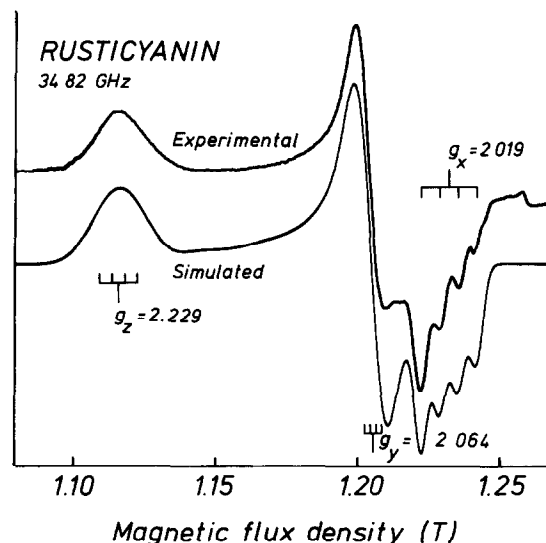


Fig.2. EPR spectrum of rusticyanin (same preparation as in fig.1) recorded at microwave frequency 34.82 GHz, temperature, 90 K and microwave power, ~10 mW. The lower trace is simulated with the same parameters as in fig.1 except line-widths (4.7, 8.0, 14) mT.

fit. The preparation contained a small amount of impurity copper, resembling free copper in water, which probably is the main reason for the small discrepancies between experimental and simulated spectra. The hyperfine coupling along  $g_y$  is not resolved and the given value can be taken as an upper limit. The fit along  $g_z$  can certainly be improved, using a larger  $A_z$ , if the line-width is allowed to be different for different hyperfine lines. The integrated intensity of the 9 GHz spectrum corresponds to 95% of the copper measured by atomic absorption spectrophotometry.

Addition of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  to a sample of rusticyanin causes a loss of the absorption band at 600 nm [4] which is restorable on addition of  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  (J. C. C. and D. H. Boxer, unpublished observations). The data of fig.3 shows that this loss of blue colour is concomitant with a loss of the  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  signal measured by EPR spectrometry. Addition of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  in a 1 : 1 ratio with  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  resulted in the disappearance of the  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  signal, indicating the absence of any paramagnetic copper, which suggests a reduction of  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  to  $\text{Cu}^+$ . Figure 3 also shows the effect of  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  on rusticyanin previously treated with 1.2 mM  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$ . Addition of  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  resulted in the

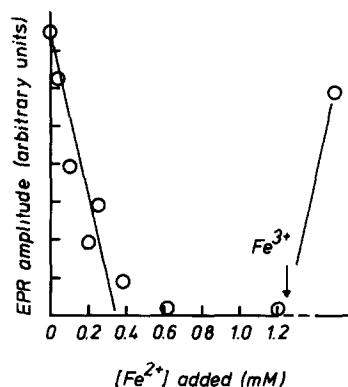


Fig.3. Titration of rusticyanin with  $\text{FeSO}_4$ . A 0.3 ml aliquot of rusticyanin (0.4 mM with respect to  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$ ) at pH 2.0 was added to an EPR cuvette. Aliquots of 10 mM  $\text{FeSO}_4$  in  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , pH 2.0 were added and the mixture allowed to stand for 5 min. The sample was then frozen and the EPR spectra were recorded at 9 GHz and 77 K. The amplitude of the resulting  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  signal was plotted against the concentration of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  added. After full reduction had occurred 20 mM  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  was added, indicated by arrow, and rusticyanin was dialysed against 10 mM  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , pH 2.0 for 4 h. The EPR spectrum was then recorded.

re-appearance of the initial spectrum. About 80% of the original signal was regained.

Increasing the pH of a solution of a blue copper protein often causes a loss of the type 1 signal and a loss of blue colour [1]. Figure 4 shows the effect of pH variation on the EPR spectrum of rusticyanin. Rusticyanin retains most of the type 1 signal until pH 7.0 is reached whereupon the type 1 EPR signal rapidly disappears. The original EPR signal can be restored by returning the rusticyanin solution to pH 2.0 and re-oxidising it with  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ . If the pH of the solution of rusticyanin is increased to 11.0 the protein precipitates and a completely new EPR signal appears. Dialysis against pH 2.0 (10 mM  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ ) and re-oxidation with  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$  resulted in the re-appearance of ~30% of the original rusticyanin spectrum.

The effect of certain anions on the EPR spectrum of oxidised rusticyanin was investigated. There was no discernable change in the signal of type 1 copper in the presence of stoichiometric amounts of azide or thiocyanate. If these copper chelating anions were added to excess (500-fold) copper was removed from the protein and the type 1 EPR signal was replaced

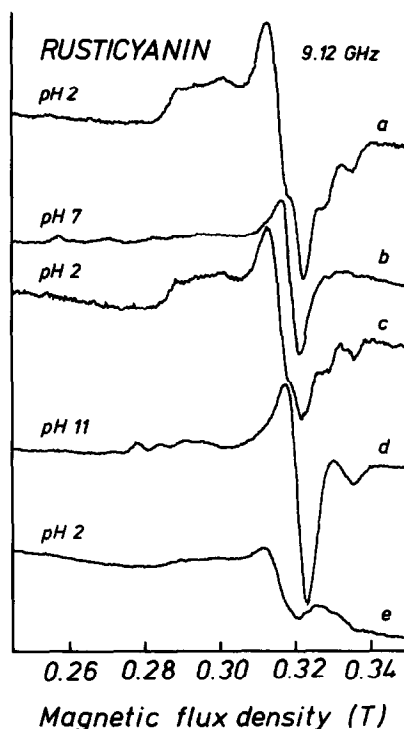


Fig.4. EPR spectra of rusticyanin (initial 2 mM  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$ ) at varying pH. (a) oxidised protein in 10 mM  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$  buffer, pH 2. (b) 1 M potassium phosphate buffer, pH 7, allowed to stand for 15 min. (c) the protein used in (b) was dialysed for 24 h against 10 mM  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , pH 2, re-oxidised with 20 mM  $\text{FeCl}_3$  and dialysed against 10 mM  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ , pH 2. (d) a separate aliquot of protein was taken to pH 11 by addition of 1 M  $\text{NaHCO}_3$  :  $\text{NaOH}$  buffer. (e) the protein used in (d) was treated in the same way as (c). The spectrometer gain for each recording was adjusted to take account for the dilution. Microwave frequency, 9.12 GHz, temp. 77 K, microwave power, 20 mW.

by a spectrum indicative of a more normal Cu (II) complex. Fluoride is a potent inhibitor of fungal laccase [8] to which it binds tightly to the type 2 copper, but  $\text{F}^-$  had no effect on the copper signal of rusticyanin even when present in 500-fold excess.

#### 4. Discussion

The EPR spectra (fig.1,2) of rusticyanin show that the one atom of copper per molecule of protein can be classified as type 1 copper [1]. The spectrum

closely resembles that of stellacyanin with respect to the hyperfine splittings and departure from axial symmetry. The absorption spectra of the two proteins are also very similar [1,4,7]. However, the two proteins differ considerably in the value of their mid-point potentials, 0.184 V for stellacyanin [9] and 0.68 V for rusticyanin [6]. This big difference is apparently not manifested in the EPR spectra. Thus it is important to remember when drawing conclusions from EPR spectra that EPR parameters may sometimes be very insensitive indicators of certain chemical properties. Stellacyanin contains no methionine [10] whereas rusticyanin contains three methionine residues [4]. It has been shown that methionine is a ligand to the copper atom in the blue protein plastocyanin [11], and differences in the nature of the ligands to the copper atom may be responsible for the difference in properties of two otherwise similar proteins.

When present in equivalent concentrations to the  $\text{Cu}^{2+}$  in rusticyanin, copper chelating anions have no effect on the EPR spectrum of the protein. When present in excess these anions can, however, remove the copper from the protein enabling studies to be carried out on the apoprotein.

Increasing the pH of a solution of copper protein causes a loss of blue colour in several cases [1]. Rusticyanin also loses its blue colour and type 1 EPR signal if the pH is raised to 7.0 and the very low intensity of the spectrum at pH 7.0 (fig.4, trace b) makes it very probable that this is due to reduction of the copper. The process can be reversed by returning the solution of rusticyanin to pH 2.0, but it is also necessary to oxidise the protein (with  $\text{Fe}^{3+}$ ) in order to regain the type 1 signal, further suggesting that the loss of colour at pH 7.0 is a reduction. The stability of rusticyanin is emphasised by the fact that even when the protein is precipitated (pH 11.0) about 30% of the native protein can be regained by returning to pH 2.0.

The data reported here show that at pH 2.0  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  reduces the copper centre. It is not auto-oxidisable,

even at pH 2.0. This suggests that rusticyanin can accept electrons from  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  though as yet it is uncertain whether cytochrome  $c_{551}$  acts as a physiological oxidant for the protein as suggested [5] in their scheme for the respiratory chain of *Thiobacillus ferro-oxidans*. But the reversible oxidation/reduction by iron and the fact that rusticyanin constitutes about 5% of the total protein of the cell strongly suggest a role in the oxidation of  $\text{Fe}^{2+}$  by *Thiobacillus ferro-oxidans*.

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